



Reconnecting the mind and body

Guest: Charlotte

Disclaimer: The contents of this interview are for informational purposes only and are not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. This interview does not provide medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.

Jess Thompson - [00:00:15]

Hi and welcome to the Super Fatigue Conference. My name is Jess Thompson and I'm the director of psychology at the Optimum Health Clinic.

Today, we're doing a recovery story and I'm delighted to be joined by Charlotte, a former client of mine.

Welcome, Charlotte.

Charlotte

Hello there. Nice to be here.

Jess Thompson

Thank you so much for joining me.

We're sharing Charlotte's recovery story to not only inspire hope in others who may be listening who are struggling with a fatigue related condition, but also to highlight some of the ways in which we work and the experience of being a client.

So it would good to start with a sense of what was going on for you at the time when you first began to notice symptoms, Charlotte.

Charlotte

Yeah, of course, it was about 2 years before I became properly ill that I started to experience symptoms and I was very much not in touch with my body and ignoring those symptoms.

It was during my second pregnancy with my youngest and I had extreme dizziness, terrible fatigue. I was hospitalized a couple of times because we thought it was related to the pregnancy. I then had a very happy home birth but haemorrhaged and ended up being rushed to hospital, refused a blood transfusion that was suggested to me and discharged myself. Went home, went for a long walk, collapsed again, just was putting my body through ridiculous amounts of stress and pressure.

And I very, very slowly recovered from that. Got to a point where I had a goodish year. And then we moved house, for about the fourth time in 2 years. And I was incredibly tired. Lots of dizziness, lots of headaches just wasn't right. I took vitamins and I kept exercising because I thought that was the way to get through it. And then I developed a virus in the January of 2010 and that was it. I couldn't get out of bed for 5 or 6 weeks, completely bed bound. So that was the start really, of post-viral chronic fatigue.

Jess Thompson - [00:02:23]

I remember when you came to the clinic, I remember reading your questionnaire actually and thinking, wow, there's quite a few things that were going on prior to your diagnosis, pregnancy, difficulties with the birth, the house moves, the renovations, more house moves and then the flu. And I actually had a sense that your system must have been quite robust to had been able to deal with that for as long as you did.

And then the kind of flu that you had, as is often the case, that viral infection was kind of like the final straw, really, rather than the complete cause of all the symptoms that followed.

And what happened when you found yourself in that state and you went to the GP? What happened then?

Charlotte

Yes, so I did go to the GP and initially they weren't quite sure what was wrong, but they saw I was very ill so they gave me some antibiotics. Said that you'll be fine in a few days. I wasn't fine in a few days. I managed to make it back to the GP. They gave me some more antibiotics. I was back again a week later and by this point I was actually worse. And they suggested some antidepressants, which wasn't the route I wanted to go down. But they kind of quite quickly realized that it was some sort of post-viral fatigue.

So it was a very quick diagnosis, I know, in comparison to some people. But that wasn't necessarily a good thing because there were no, there's no treatment plan. I was told antidepressants because you're clearly very depressed. And I certainly was very low because I was ill and I couldn't work out why and I couldn't look after my children. And they also told me not to do too much resting, which was a very strange piece of advice looking back now, the idea was to not become deconditioned. So that's where I found myself.

Jess Thompson

And with this condition in our experience, you know, it's not actually the depression that causes the fatigue, but it's actually the other way round. Like you say, you were experiencing all these really difficult symptoms. You couldn't look after your children. It's a bit of a recipe for feeling low.

So can you share a bit about your other symptoms and how they developed over time?

Charlotte

Yeah, of course. So there was this crushing fatigue. It's not a tiredness like I had experienced before. It's not that the end of the day I've done too much, it was completely body slamming tiredness that wasn't relieved by sleep. A lot of the time I couldn't sleep, which was very cruel. But even when I did manage to sleep, it was not refreshing. I'd wake up feeling as bad the next day.

I had incredible headaches, lots of dizziness, anxiety, I had a complete inability to control my blood sugar. So eating every twoish hours through the day and then a couple of times through the night as well, I'd wake up with all those symptoms of low blood sugar during the night, which was really worrying at the time.

And cognitive function was really severely impaired. I couldn't tolerate noise, couldn't really tolerate light, I couldn't cope with the radio on, I couldn't read a book, I might just about manage half an hour of a comedy program, but then that would be me wiped out. So, yeah, I was in pretty bad shape.

Jess Thompson

Yeah, absolutely. That list of symptoms you're describing is a common set of symptoms of this condition. And it kind of indicated how many of your body's systems weren't functioning effectively

and you'd been given this diagnosis of post-viral fatigue, which, as you say, didn't really have a kind of treatment option. So I wonder, what did you do next? What did you try?

Charlotte - [00:06:05]

Well, I rested for several weeks as much as I could, thinking that that would help, it didn't. I tried the GP one more time and there was nothing that they could do to help.

So we came across a private GP in London and she was really helpful to a point, as in, she was the first person to talk about diet and supplements. She did lots and lots of tests. I had vitamin infusions, intravenous vitamin infusions, lots of magnesium and lots of vitamin C, and she had some practical advice about resting and pacing, and this was all helpful to a point. As in, following this sort of procedure for about 3 to 6 months I was then able to be up and about in the house when the children were up. So I'd be up with them in the morning before school, back in bed for the day, and then in the sort of afternoons I could sit and watch CBeebies with them and cook them some fish fingers, and then back to bed again.

So it was an improvement, but it wasn't any quality of life and it was at that point I kind of kept researching and came across the Optimum Health Clinic.

Jess Thompson

Yeah, so you came to the OHC as a patient and I met you for the first time in 2013, so a couple of years after you'd become ill. And you attended the 90 day program in person, which is a workshop which we've now moved entirely online, but the time that Charlotte did it, it consisted of five afternoons of group sessions with other people suffering from chronic fatigue or fibromyalgia.

And in these sessions, we begin by giving people a really clear understanding of the illness they're experiencing. So focusing on helping them to understand the predisposing factors that might have led to the illness and also the perpetuating factors, perpetuating factors, the things that were kind of perhaps keeping them stuck in an unwell state.

And we draw out a boatload and help them to identify the various psychological and physiological lows they've been experiencing. And these lows actually are effectively the puzzle pieces that need to be addressed. I'm kind of mixing up the analogy a bit there, because we also view CFS, ME and long-COVID as being like a puzzle with lots of pieces that can be solved, but you need to identify what they are to be able to solve them.

So I'm talking about this program from a practitioner perspective. But Charlotte, I'd love to hear how it felt for you as the client attending that program. Can you describe your experience of that?

Charlotte

Yeah, of course. I was incredibly excited, but I was also incredibly anxious that coming up to London and spending that amount of time face to face with other people would cause a crash. This probably isn't relevant at the moment, but we took care of the practical side of things by staying, I think it's a Premier Inn in Hampstead and it's a 10 minute car drive to and from. Brought lots and lots of food because obviously I was struggling with blood sugar issues and my husband came to support. So the practical side of things were taken care of.

And then when we arrived on the course day it was, I instantly felt very comfortable because you held space beautifully for everybody, and as did the other people who were helping on the course. And it was just amazing to meet people in the same situation. To suddenly feel like I wasn't the only one. It had been incredibly isolating as a condition up until that point.

So that was useful. And you taught us all these tools which were invaluable in terms of my next period of recovery. The sort of, the getting to know yourself and understanding what state you were

in at any given time. Really, really important because I had been so disconnected from my body and what was going on in it.

Jess Thompson - [00:10:00]

I think it was the first time for you, perhaps, that you really recognized the state that your system was in, and we talk about the maladaptive stress response, which is basically where somebody has kind of been experiencing repeated stress over and over again. So over time, the body decides well there's no point coming back down to the calm, connected, restful space, and it keeps itself stuck up in a state of stress.

And, of course, the very ingredients of being unwell just add to that. So all those kind of thoughts and feelings about symptoms and about the things you've lost as a result of the illness, that sense of when am I ever going to get better? All those things kind of perpetuate that maladaptive stress response.

And I remember for you it's kind of, that really noticing, that really recognizing, OK, I'm in a maladaptive stress state, meant that actually I seem to remember things like sleep and digestion actually improved quite quickly just with that understanding that you've been given.

Charlotte

Yes, that is true. I saw a big change after those initial few days in the clinic as I started to understand what was going on in my body and understand that I had some control over that, that I could start to calm my system down. And it wasn't easy, it didn't all happen straight away. But yeah very, very powerful.

Jess Thompson

And kind of during and after the program, you also had one to one sessions with me. And we've got a very flexible client centered approach to adhoc psychology sessions at the clinic, so people can have sessions of varying lengths, either 30 minutes or an hour depending on their need. And for you, there was a combination of the two. We did some shorter navigations sessions, so when perhaps you'd gone off track a bit and needed some coaching to get back on track. And we also had some longer sessions where we worked on the deeper emotional stuff and some of the trauma of being ill, actually.

I wonder of all the things you learned in that program that you attended and in those sessions, what felt the most helpful for you?

Charlotte

I think learning to be in touch with myself and see how I was feeling to come back to myself was incredibly helpful. I think reframing was a really, really useful tool and I didn't think I was experiencing trauma. I hadn't been involved in a war, in a famine, I had a loving upbringing, supportive marriage. You know, we had food on the table. I didn't feel that I'd experienced trauma, but actually starting to know and understand that being ill for that length of time, it is trauma. It's just possibly a different type of trauma.

And once I understood that and was able to use the tools to sort of calm my nervous system, then that was incredibly helpful.

Jess Thompson

Yeah, it was kind of like at the time when you came to the clinic, your mind and your body were in a bit of a divorce situation, there wasn't really much helpful communication. You kind of felt that your body had let you down. It wasn't giving you energy to be able to do what you wanted to do. But your body also had a sense that your mind really let it down over time. And I think, as you say, learning to

reconnect with yourself, really reconnect with your body and start to understand the language really of your body was really, really helpful.

And trauma really, there's big T trauma which are the things you mentioned, things like war, famine, those sorts of things. But there's also what we call small T trauma and really this is anything that anybody feels in the moment that it happens. They don't have the resources to handle or respond to. And being as ill as you were with two young children, you know, I don't know anybody that would have the resources to actually handle that. So, of course, your system experienced that as traumatic. And it sounds like working through that was quite key for you in really coming down out of that stress state into the healing state so that you could begin that gentle process of recovery.

Charlotte - [00:14:23]

Yes, I was very, very hard on myself when I was ill and when I realized that, and started to realize I would never behave like this to anybody else and start to be kind to myself, and that was a really big part of the healing process.

Jess Thompson

I'm wondering, obviously, I worked quite closely with you through this, but I wonder if you could share with other people about those times when you felt that actually things weren't really working or you were missing something?

Charlotte

Yes, there were lots of those, you know, recovery is not like that, it's messy, it's difficult. But in those setbacks there is learning, there was always learning in the setbacks. Something wasn't quite working so we need to change that. Something that was working is now holding me back. And I think that's why, for me, having the ongoing sessions with you was incredibly helpful, because I think without that I would have been derailed and then just sort of lost. So, yes, it was not linear at all, the recovery.

Jess Thompson

It never is. We actually talk about recovery as being like the first rocket that went to the moon that actually spent something like more than 90 percent of time off course, but the key to getting there was the course correction. And that's what those sessions were so helpful for.

Partly, as you say, because there are bumps in the road, there is an element of trial and error. And also because when you come off track, actually, there can be quite a response to that, quite a fearful response. And that's something that we really worked on, actually, how to respond when you did come off track in a way that helped your body get back into the healing state.

And I often refer to the kind of setbacks you're talking about as kind of like a lay-by on the road to recovery. Usually some kind of pothole that you've hit, whether that be a psychological or physiological one, sends you into a lay-by. And in that place, it's really about making sure you meet your needs for rest, for the healing state, for recuperation before setting out on the road again.

And I know that for a time we had sessions quite regularly while we navigated those potholes. Because, as you say, there's always something to learn in a setback or lay-by. And once you've learned it, you can then ideally avoid that pothole the next time you come out on the road.

So I wonder what, if you can think back, to what were the potholes for you that you hit that you needed to address?

Charlotte

Casting my mind back. I think it was probably a lot of time slipping back into those old patterns of behavior. Slipping back into being an achiever, going with my head, rather than my body, worrying too

much about what other people think, that was a big one. Yeah, overdoing it. They were probably the three most common potholes for me.

And as you say, I was reasonably well and functioning sort of in the world and those issues would come up. But being able to come back and have that half hour session with you just to get it sorted to then get me on my way again was incredibly helpful.

Jess Thompson - [00:17:41]

And I think that those potholes you're describing, those kind of issues, the things you bumped into, as it were, bumps in the road, I think people listening will be able to relate to that. You know, that sense of the worries and concerns about what other people think, maybe imagining that that's quite critical. And often that's when you've got quite a loud inner critic yourself. And of course, the inner critic and the achiever type tend to go hand in hand. It's that kind of quite hard on yourself way, that you described earlier, you were quite hard on yourself, quite critical of yourself and pushed yourself. So that led to the kind of boom bust scenario that sometimes we'd have to do some work with.

And I remember that for you initially, you were kind of actually looking for one issue and one solution and you thought it might be your diet, you thought it might be your hormones, you thought it might be your heart. And I think this is true for so many people. And in fact, I was the same when I had CFS, I was actually almost longing for one of the tests that the doctor carried out to come back positive, so that I could then know what was wrong with me.

It sounds as though quite soon after joining the clinic, you realized that actually a multifaceted approach, that integrated approach was what you needed to heal.

Charlotte

Yes, definitely. I was desperate for there to be one thing wrong with me. One specialist that I saw to say, yes, it's your thyroid, or you've got POTS and then for them to hand me a green slip of paper, with a magic pill that was going to fix it all because I thought that was going to be the easiest way out of this. And that wasn't the case. I think even if I had one of those conditions, it wouldn't have been a magic fix to have a prescription.

So, no, it was a very much multifaceted recovery process. I needed to have lots of different supports in place. It was complicated, but I've learnt so much.

Jess Thompson

And that's often the case. And I know so far we've been really focusing on the psychology in this talk today, the psychology side of your recovery. But you also worked with nutrition. So can you talk a bit about how the nutritional side of the OHC helped you?

Charlotte

Yes, absolutely. But when I first came to the OHC, as I mentioned, I'd had some help with nutrition. So I thought, well, I've done that bit, tick, that box is done. I've given up gluten and caffeine and sugar and I'll be fine now.

So I didn't come to the nutrition help until I reached plateau. And the nutritionists at The Optimum health Clinic are experts in energy conditions. And so there were a number of things that made a difference quite quickly, actually.

And that was great, because by that point I was more sensible about how I use my energy, so those nutritional changes and supplements gave me a bit more energy and then I used it more wisely, because of the work we done on the psychology side. And I think for me that the nutrition is something that will always sort of roll on. And I have tweaked and changed over the past decade how I eat, just to make sure that I am in optimum health.

Jess Thompson - [00:20:52]

It's quite often the case, actually, that somebody will come to the clinic and they might start on the psychology side and then as you experienced, they kind of put all of those psychology tools into place. So working on those psychological subtypes, working on pacing, and then might hit a plateau. And what we're skilled and experienced in is noticing when perhaps we need to add something else in.

And the timing of that is really key, because if you're kind of in an extreme state of maladaptive stress and you try taking a lot of supplements, actually your body's not in a great state to be able to absorb them. So you kind of got to a place where things are much more stable, your maladaptive stress had come down, but you were still not experiencing the health and energy that you wanted. And so by adding in nutrition at that point, that was really the next step for you in terms of energy and health.

Charlotte

Yes, that's absolutely right. As I mentioned my blood sugar was a problem, I couldn't control my blood sugar. And so we even, when we done all this work, I was still waking in the night needing to eat. So that that wasn't a psychological issue, that was very much a physiological one and I needed some help with that.

Jess Thompson

Yeah, absolutely. And I know that, as is the case for many people, you also found things outside of the Optimum Health Clinic which really helped you with your recovery. Can you tell us a bit about those things?

Charlotte

Yes, I can. For me, yoga was hugely important. And I'm not talking about the yoga that we often see on Instagram with people in bikinis doing headstands, but very gentle, physical movement. Restorative yoga, yoga, nidra which is a very deep, deep rest, breathing practices, meditation, the sorts of practices that are very calming and soothing to the nervous system and really helps connects mind and body and body and mind.

In fact, I found yoga so powerful and so helpful that I retrained to become a yoga teacher. Did a wonderful 3 year teacher training course with the British Wheel of Yoga, along with some other energy centered yoga teacher training courses that I've attended. So, yeah, that's that's been hugely helpful to me.

Jess Thompson

Brilliant I know that's made a huge difference to your life, actually, and we'll talk about that a bit now, actually. I wonder if you can describe what life is like for you now that you're recovered, what's different?

Charlotte

Life is different. And I think in those early stages of being ill I wanted to get back to how my life was before. But I think when you're that broken you have the option to make choices about how you're going to go forwards. And going back wasn't sustainable. I wouldn't have been able to be well if I had gone back to those old patterns.

So, yeah, I have the energy to do all sorts of things that I didn't think were possible when I was ill. Huge dog walks, lucky enough to go skiing on occasion, foreign travel, enjoying time with my family and teaching yoga, which is a huge passion of mine.

Jess Thompson - [00:24:09]

It's so good to hear, so good to hear, having been with you through that journey, you know how unwell you were when you first came to the clinic and just hearing how different life is now.

And it sounds as though, as you say, you learnt a huge amount from it. So I wonder, what do you still do apart from yoga, what else do you still practice in your life to help you to maintain that robust recovery?

Charlotte

Yes. So first of all, quality sleep. You know, I really work, working hard is the wrong way to put it, but quality sleep is important. So I prioritize making sure that happens. I do rest most days, even if I don't feel like I need it. I think even if you haven't experienced an energy condition, having a rest every day is hugely beneficial. I eat really, really well. Nutrition is really important, and that's not to say I can't have the odd naughty day, but eating well makes me feel good so I do enjoy doing that.

I keep my nervous system calm, as much as I can, not always possible, not now I've got teenagers in the house, but yeah, keeping my nervous system calm is really important. Yeah, I think they're the key things.

Jess Thompson

It sounds like there's much more priority of you, your kind of self care, much more awareness of what your body needs actually to feel good and to feel well.

And it's interesting with the rest piece that you talk about, because I think people are kind of naturally healthy that may not succumb to something like chronic fatigue, have a really natural balance of work, rest and play in their day, it's something that they commit themselves to do that resting. And it sounds like through your experience of chronic fatigue that's what really helped you to develop that more balanced approach.

Charlotte

Yes, yeah, I think that's very, very accurate. I was very much an achiever, and I still have to sometimes put her back in her box. But yes, having that balance is really important. And I'm so much more in tune with my body now. I can tell when I'm pushing it just a little bit too far and when I need to ease off.

And that's not to say I'm perfect. I'm not. I still sometimes get it wrong and I will then have a period of fatigue. It's nothing like it used to be and it's usually only a day or two. But my body says, hold on there, you need to go back to your pillars that keep you healthy. And I'm able to now listen to my body, and I've got all the tools from my time working with you, I've got my yoga tools, I've got my nutrition. I put it all back in place and that's what I need to get back on track.

Jess Thompson

Yeah. So again, back to that relationship, that mind body relationship that when you first came to us was, as I say, kind of like a divorce is a much more communicative, trusting relationship now, whereby if your body is communicating something to you, you really respond to that, you really listen to that.

Charlotte

Yeah, that's absolutely the case, yes.

Jess Thompson - [00:27:23]

So to finish today, I wonder if you could share what you'd say to someone, perhaps who's listening to this now who's struggling with a fatigue condition, what would you say to someone at the beginning of their recovery journey that you wish you'd known back then?

Charlotte

There's so much that I would like to say to myself, if I could or to somebody else, but it's overwhelming, isn't it, I think to hear too much. So I think the key things would be allow yourself to take rest. Try to be in tune with your body. Keep yourself in as calm a state as you can. And know it's probably going to be a multifaceted way out.

Jess Thompson

That's super helpful. I know another thing that you learned as you went along was that actually the slower you went, the quicker you made progress.

Yeah, we talk about the hare and the tortoise that actually you need more tortoise, which for achiever types is hard. Initially, you were trying to push your way back to health. And it wasn't until you spotted that achiever, in relation to recovery, and did some work on that, that you actually slowed down and actually things then sped up.

Charlotte

Yeah, that's absolutely right. I tried to get better the way I had got ill, which was to push, which was to constantly be researching and trying to read books and rest now, get up now, have this supplement now. And actually, yeah, the more I slowed it down, the quicker that recovery became.

Jess Thompson

Yeah. Which is a difficult thing to get your head around as a achiever type because previously pushing harder meant success and actually for success and recovery it's actually about stopping that pushing. So that's going to be super helpful for people to hear.

So I just wanted to spend a moment now thinking about how you now offer support and help for people experiencing fatigue through your yoga. So as you say, as part of your recovery, yoga became a huge part of that. And you actually, I remember you starting your yoga training, actually, and we did some work around how to approach that because those old patterns, of course rear up again when you start something new.

So now you've completed that 3 year training and you're offering support for people with fatigue, can you talk us through that? In case there may be some people watching who might be interested in getting exactly that sort of support?

Charlotte

Yes, absolutely. So the yoga that I practice and the yoga that I teach is very gentle, very soothing for the nervous system, teaching the ability to come into deep rest. I know when I was unwell I did a lot of horizontal stressing. So having tools to kind of help you rest are really useful. Tools to help connect the mind and body. Offer group classes and one to ones for people who are in that situation.

Jess Thompson

And that's presumably online, so it's really accessible for people?

Charlotte - [00:30:43]

Yes, since the beginning of the pandemic it is all online via Zoom, so, yes, geographically that's much more accessible than it used to be. But hopefully when we can get back and be in the same room together, then I operate out of Surrey.

Jess Thompson

OK, so actually being online is brilliant because people who are experiencing fatigue, often the effort of travelling somewhere is as much energy as they've actually got for that day. So the fact that they can do this in the comfort of their own home, supported by someone, by you, you know, someone who really gets this condition from the inside out, you've really walked the talk as it were, and used yoga to really mend that mind body relationship even further.

So I wonder how people can get in touch with you. What's the best way for them to kind of contact? You can obviously add you details with this.

Jess Thompson

Yes. I've got a website which is gentle yoga with Charlotte and an Instagram page/feed, I'm not terribly great on the old social media, but that's [charlotte.wightman.yoga](https://www.instagram.com/charlotte.wightman.yoga). But yes, if you pop the details below the video, then if people want to get in touch and I would love to hear from them and offer help if I can.

Jess Thompson

Brilliant. I absolutely know you will be able to do that in a really skillful, sensitive way.

Well, thank you so much, Charlotte, for joining me today. A, it's just a delight to see you again. It's been a little while since I last saw you. And, B, I just know how helpful this story will be for those people watching who might be experiencing fatigue themselves. So thank you.

Charlotte

It's been an absolute pleasure.